

A Proposed Model on the Evolution of Psychopathy and Psychotypicality, and Their Roles in Choosing Leaders

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Introduction

This paper will argue that psychopathy, which is to be construed as a genetically driven form of Antisocial Personality Disorder, provides a survival benefit which is selected for by natural selection. This is within the context of an assertion that human evolution is a special case, where the evolution of human physiology and human culture occur interactively and on a group basis. Furthermore, a concept of psychotypicality is introduced, referring simply to all people who are not psychopaths, but including the existence of traits complementary to psychopathy within this context of human evolution as a special case. Finally, the suggestion is made that the vast majority of leaders throughout history, and still today, have been on the Personality Disorder spectrum, specifically with respect to psychopathy, sociopathy, and narcissism.

Personality Disorders

Within the most authoritative reference for mental disorders, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association, there is no distinction made between psychopathy and sociopathy. However, some members of the psychology profession, such as Professor of Psychology Ramani Durvasula, PhD, do make such a distinction, and the discussion herein will be consistent with this trend in usage. In the DSM, the diagnostic features attributed to both psychopathy and sociopathy are merged together under the title of Antisocial Personality Disorder.

In popular culture, the term “psychopath” comes with much connotation which is not present in its technical definition. The first, and most important, clarification to make explicit is that most psychopaths are not serial killers or even one-time murderers – although a few are, and these are the ones we hear about when their crimes are discovered. The key defining feature of psychopathy is the absence of any feelings of empathy or remorse. As such, there is no purely emotional factor restraining a psychopath from murdering. This lack of empathy is neurological, to the extent that it can be recognized in brain activity scanning techniques such as PET (Positron Emission Tomography) and FMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging).

Another set of traits exhibited by psychopaths, which is of particular importance for this discussion, is related to their innate ability to manipulate other people. Far from being the type of person that others think of as being “a little off,” psychopaths are generally described as charming or charismatic. While unable to feel emotions in the conventional sense, they are typically skilled at mimicking emotions, and are usually pathological – and therefore well-practiced – liars. Psychopaths gain others’ trust easily, and are often considered pillars of society.

Sociopaths and narcissists share many traits with psychopaths, but not all traits, and possibly to a lesser degree. For example, narcissists may feel shame after committing an unethical act, and sociopaths tend to have poorly developed social skills and may indeed be perceived of as “a little off,” or violent. A detailed comparison is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is important to emphasize one particular trait that all three share: an impairment in, or total absence of, feelings of empathy.

Note also that sociopathy is thought to result from childhood trauma and/or physical or emotional abuse, while psychopathy is believed to be genetic. In the words of Dr. Durvasula, “a psychopath is born, and a sociopath is made.”

Human Evolution

In the predominant view of natural selection, as supported by evolutionary biologists such as Richard Dawkins, genes are passed on to progeny on a strictly individual basis. After all, the physical act of gene preservation occurs during procreation, with genes supplied by an individual male and an individual female.

However, consider the frailty of human physiology compared to other animals. Humans do not have claws with which to defend ourselves, as rodents do, and have much less musculature compared to other apes. Humans do not have profound canine teeth, and even if we did our comparatively weak jaw muscles would make them less potent as either a defense mechanism or for hunting. We cannot run fast enough to evade most predators, as can a gazelle or even a rabbit, nor do we reproduce at nearly a high enough rate to withstand widespread predation as do sea turtles. Physiologically, human beings are tasty morsels waiting to happen, ripe to be predated into extinction.

None the less, we have come to thrive on Earth, even to dominate the ecosystem. The two main traits we have which allow this to be possible are language and tool use. With language we can organize as groups for any fluid purpose, such that the group is much stronger than the individual. With tool use we can more than make up for all of the physiological deficiencies in our ability to defend ourselves and to hunt. We could not have evolved to be such frail animals without these faculties. Furthermore, it would be impossible for genes

resulting in a physiology with reduced survivability to be passed on to progeny on an individual basis, if this were the only factor.

Language and tool use are elements of culture, and culture is by definition a group activity. If human physiology could not have evolved without culture, then it stands to reason that group activity affects the makeup of the gene pool. Therefore, humans must evolve as groups to at least some extent, and not exclusively on an individual basis. Human evolution is a special case; it is the case where culture is a dominant factor in survival.

For most of human pre-history, groups were generally defined at the tribal level. A tribe in which a new, better tool is invented, or a more effective survival strategy is devised and communicated will be better able to thrive in its environment. This will allow *all* members of the tribe a better likelihood of reproduction and gene preservation. Meanwhile, less effective tribes, along with their members' individual genes, may dwindle or scatter.

Intraspecific Killing

Intraspecific killing is the killing of one member of a particular species by another member of the same species. All members of a given species are competing for exactly the same resources. They all eat the same foods, seek the same types of shelter, and attempt to mate with the same prospects. At first glance, it seems that if a member of a population were to evolve a tendency to kill off all of its same-species competitors, that member would have more of these resources available and would be more likely to pass on its genes. There are, however, at least two problems with this scenario.

First, while the initial killer to evolve this trait would have ample potential mates available, assuming that it only killed same-sex other members, its progeny would not. The destruction of its competitors would result in a progressively smaller population of both sexes in later generations, resulting in fewer mating opportunities for its progeny. Second, it is known that gene pools with less diversity are more prone to birth defects and less likely to be able to adapt to changes in the environment.

It is, therefore, a trait shared by all species on Earth to have an instinctual aversion to intraspecific killing. Lt. Col David Grossman (U.S. Army-Ret.) teaches psychology at Arkansas State University and is an expert, author, and consultant on the psychology of killing, particularly within the contexts of law enforcement and the military. He is quoted:

Every species, with a few exceptions, has a hardwired resistance to killing its own kind in territorial and mating battles. When animals with antlers and horns fight one another, they head butt in a harmless fashion. But when they fight any other species, they go to the side to gut and gore. Piranhas will turn

their fangs on anything, but they fight one another with flicks of the tail. Rattlesnakes will bite anything, but they wrestle one another... When we human beings are overwhelmed with anger and fear, we slam head-on into that midbrain resistance that generally prevents us from killing. Only sociopaths – who by definition don't have that resistance – lack this innate violence immune system.

Obviously, intraspecific killing does occur at times, but a species which expresses this behavior without constraints will not be viable and will become extinct. The behavior is self-limiting and does not usually provide a net evolutionary benefit; it is the exception to the rule.

Warfare Vs. Murder

Humans also experience this instinctual aversion to the killing of other humans, as it is a part of our genetic heritage as a member of the earth's ecosystem. However, the condition that all humans are competing for the exact same resources still exists. If humans had a mechanism to overcome their aversion to intraspecific killing, without limiting the mating opportunities of their progeny, they could freely kill other people and secure those resources. Natural selection would favor this trait as long as it had constraints. It is suggested here that this is precisely what has happened.

The key unit of this mechanism is the group – the tribe in pre-history and the nation-state in cultures with civilization. The constraint then becomes that it is evolutionarily favorable to kill people in other groups and take their stuff, but not favorable to kill people within one's own group. This may be the origin of the distinction between warfare and murder. It is instructive to note that the often quoted biblical commandment, "thou shalt not kill," is better translated as "thou shalt not murder." The Old Testament which surrounds this commandment is comprised of page after page of its adherents killing people in other tribes and seizing their land, possessions, and associates, all with the presumed blessing of deity.

Species where intraspecific killing has been observed tend to be social animals, and include chimpanzees, wolves, elephants, lions, hyenas, and ants. Ants, in particular, generally express the behavior as group attacks on neighboring ant colonies, displaying an instinctual differentiation between warfare and murder. Renowned primatologist Jane Goodall, while studying a population of chimpanzees in Tanzania which she named the "Kasakela" community, observed a group of more than ten chimps splintering off to form a second community to the south, named the "Kahama." Soon afterwards, all social contact between the two groups had ended, and they each began to patrol the new border. Males from the Kasakela eventually began hostile raids into Kahama territory, which included intraspecific killing to the point where

the smaller Kahama community was annihilated. These chimpanzees, also, appear to have made a distinction between warfare and murder.

Psychopathy and Psychotypicality

However, even in warfare there is a tendency for humans to remain averse to killing other humans. In fact, for some people the guilt associated with the act of taking another human life is permanently devastating to their psyche. For the evolutionary benefit of intraspecific killing to fully express itself, there must also be a mechanism to overcome this aversion.

Psychopaths have no instinctual aversion to killing other humans. However, if the rate of psychopathy within a cultural group were to exceed some very small critical rate, the group would quickly become unviable. This would result both for the reasons discussed above for aversion to intraspecific killing, and from the fact that a group full of deceitful, self-centered psychopaths would find it impossible to organize effectively, thus negating the benefit that humans get from language. No, most of the population must be comprised of psychotypical members, that is, people who are not psychopaths, who can be trusted to work hard and create value for the group.

The evolutionary solution is for psychotypical people to selectively exhibit psychopathic behaviors. It is suggested here that this is accomplished by having a very small rate of psychopathy maintained in the human population, along with a mechanism by which these psychopaths tend to become the leaders of the group. It is further suggested that psychotypicality is not merely the absence of psychopathy, but that it is characterized by a set of traits which facilitate this leadership dynamic. This set of traits, emotional tendencies which allow psychotypical people to be manipulated by psychopaths, will be referred to as “handles” in this discussion. Psychopathy and psychotypicality evolved together, as polar aspects of the same phenomenon.

In other words, the ability of the psychopath to manipulate, the perception of them as “charming,” is not wholly a trait of the psychopath themselves, but an interplay between their own tendencies and an instinctive willingness of the psychotypical to be manipulated. This is the single most important assertion made in this paper. This subconscious willingness to be manipulated serves the psychotypical, in that it persuades them to form strong groups with the intention to seize the resources of other groups, while freeing them from the guilt feelings of their own subtle greed and aggression. (Author’s note: I am not claiming to exclude myself from the weaknesses of the psychotypical.)

God and Country

The two primary emotional handles gripped by psychopaths can be summed up by the phrase “god and country.” While there may be other vulnerabilities which the psychopath can exploit in certain individuals, such as explicit greed or loneliness, religiosity and patriotism usually marshal intense emotional responses related to a sense of duty. This is generally true across cultures, although we may see variations in geographically isolated populations.

While religion may serve periphery functions such as providing metaphysical, ethical, and lifestyle models, the key function of religiosity, at least from an evolutionary standpoint, may actually be to facilitate human intraspecific killing. It would be hard to deny the historical record of countless wars fought in the name of one god or another, with passionately non-empathetic appeals for the destruction of enemies made to these gods. Furthermore, the historical record shows that religiosity facilitates killing even within a single human group in the form of capital punishment for heresy. Perhaps this serves a function for selecting out genes which play a factor in non-conformist behavior.

Patriotism is, of course, the very basis for warfare, and therefore the seizing of the resources of others. It is within the basic unit of the tribe or the city-state where raiding parties or armies are raised. It is also within the confines of these basic groups that the majority of human genes are passed on to progeny. There are always lofty rationalizations for why a particular war is just, and why the “others” deserve to be vanquished; but close examination of any conflict will usually uncover one or more physical resources in contest.

Both patriotism and religiosity perform the function of depersonalizing the intended victim, to seeing them as less than human. Depersonalization is known to be an encouraging factor in violence, and is ubiquitous in warfare propaganda. In all cases, killings made in the name of a shared god or for the fatherland tend to reverse the feeling of guilt; that is, instead of feeling guilty about killing, one may feel guilty about failing to perform their divine or patriotic duty by not killing.

Social Conformity

In 1955, pioneering psychologist Solomon Asch conducted an experiment where test subjects were shown a series of graphics depicting sets of four lines. One line was the “standard line,” and the other three were “comparison lines,” one of which was the same length as the standard line. The test subject was asked to identify which of the comparison lines was the same length as the standard line for each set. The comparison was deliberately and entirely unambiguous, since all lines were parallel, started from the same base, and the three comparison lines were significantly different lengths. Four confederates of the experiment – members of the experiment team – posed as fellow test subjects, were seated

alongside the actual test subject, and were asked to give their answers before the actual test subject. In some rounds, the four confederates gave a clearly wrong, but unanimous, answer. In this case, the actual test subjects gave the same wrong answer as the confederates more than one-third of the time, going along with the group. In control trials, where the test subject was alone, they erred less than one percent of the time.

This, and many other similar experiments, demonstrates the willingness of humans to conform to social pressure. The fact that conformity is not absolute may hint at a genetic predisposition among certain individuals. Research is conclusive that there is also a strong cultural component, but if humans do indeed evolve as groups, sorting out any genetic influence from purely learned cultural behavior would be difficult. In all of this discussion of the handles of psychotypicality, it should be noted that there is no expectation that all members of a population express these handles equally. This would, in fact, be highly unusual for any behavior, whether originating from “nature” or from “nurture.”

It is proposed here that there is a related psychotypical handle, which will be referred to as “willing suspension of disbelief.” It is analogous to the phenomenon of the same name whereby a person entertained by a story sets aside some critical thinking and ignores plot inconsistencies, in order to become better immersed in the story. The handle is a combination of this story-telling phenomenon and the psychological phenomenon of rationalization, such that the willing suspension of disbelief becomes an actual, real-world belief in an inconsistent story. This is to say that psychotypical people tend to accept lies told to them by their leaders, even if they realize on some level that the statements made probably are lies, and even when the evidence surrounding an issue strongly suggests inconsistencies with the authoritative analysis. This compliments the diagnostically listed trait of psychopaths as pathological liars, like a key fitting into a keyhole. Note that confirmation bias makes it is far easier to observe this behavior in other groups, than it is to observe it in one’s own.

Obedience

The most profound demonstration of how willing psychotypical people are to adopt sociopathic behaviors is found in social psychologist Stanley Milgram’s famous obedience experiments. In this, test subjects were told that they would help to study the effect of punishment on learning by acting as “teachers,” delivering electric shocks to “learners” in an adjacent room when the learners gave a wrong answer in a series of questions. The teachers were actively urged on by an authoritative head experimenter if they showed hesitation in delivering the shocks. The eight switches activated by the test subject were labeled with progressively higher voltages, and progressively severe descriptions such as “moderate,” “strong,” “intense,” etc. There were no real electric shocks, but as the teachers flipped the switches, the learner, who was a confederate of the experiment, cried out in progressively

intense simulated agony or pleaded for the experiment to stop. In one formulation of this experiment, involving forty test subjects, sixty-five percent were willing to deliver all eight electric shocks, including the last one labeled “XXX 435-450 Volts,” even after the learner had fallen silent to simulate unconsciousness. The historical record features plentiful examples of this phenomenon played out in real human suffering, where fundamentally ordinary people have committed horrendous acts in the name of following orders.

It is important to note that, within the context of the claim that humans evolve as groups, some amount of social conformity and obedience can be explained merely by the fact that humans derive their strength by acting in groups. Numerous group activities represent legitimate, positive adaptations to the survival challenge, such as: organized agriculture, defense against predators, hunting, construction of group shelters, organized production, etc. Furthermore, hierarchy is the legitimate means by which groups are organized. Without hierarchy, many of humankind’s greatest achievements could not have been accomplished, such as: efficient large scale production based on division of labor (i.e., the assembly line), the construction of monumental architecture, even civilization itself. Social conformity and obedience are not in themselves unhealthy traits for humans; they are only problematic when they result in a member of society expressing or holding beliefs which are not reliably consistent with external reality, or when an overriding of empathy facilitates human intraspecific violence. The negative aspects of conformity and obedience are what promote psychopathic leadership.

Learned Sociopathy

Social psychologists define “normative social influence” in terms of gaining approval or avoiding disapproval by following social norms. “Norms,” in turn, are understood rules for accepted and expected behavior. Furthermore, a “role” is a specific position within the organizational structure of a group, along with the norms associated with that position. It has been shown experimentally that adopting a particular role tends to cause changes in a person’s attitudes or even beliefs. When the norms for a given role conflict with a person’s pre-existing attitudes or beliefs, but the person has spent some time willingly behaving according to those norms, there is a strong tendency for the person to rationalize their own behavior. This rationalization relieves a sensation of “cognitive dissonance,” a type of moral discomfort, resulting when a person’s actions do not coincide with their own beliefs.

To gain insight into the internal workings of prisons, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted an experiment in 1972. In this, about two dozen young men were carefully selected from a group of seventy volunteers, and randomly assigned one of two roles based on the flip of a coin. Test subjects assigned the role of prison “guard” were instructed on the potential danger of the situation, but were otherwise free to improvise their own formal rules for

maintaining order, which they did based on their own implicit understanding of the socially prescribed behavior for their role. Those assigned to the role of “prisoner,” were unexpectedly picked up by a city policeman (Palo Alto, CA), handcuffed, booked, deloused, put in a uniform, and locked in a cell for the remainder of the two week study. After six days, the experimenters decided they must end the experiment early, because the test subjects were adopting their roles only too well. According to Zimbardo, “We were horrified because we saw some [guards] treat [prisoners] as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while [prisoners] became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival, and of their mounting hatred for the guards.” Three prisoners were released after only four days, showing signs of situational trauma such as “hysterical crying, confusion in thinking, and severe depression.”

Psychopaths are necessarily only a small fraction of the population, and when they are in leadership positions, they need psychotypicals to fill the roles by which the psychopath’s vision is realized. Since many of the commands given by a psychopath will reflect a lack of empathy, faithfully executing them may require the psychotypical to rationalize their behavior in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. Within the current model, “learned sociopathy” will refer to the willing acceptance of empathy impairment as it relates to specific roles. Since psychotypical people are by definition not genetically psychopathic, it seems more fitting to characterize these learned behaviors as sociopathic, although only loosely so. The learned sociopath adopts these roles willingly, not through trauma or abuse, and psychotypical emotions such as empathy and remorse are not eliminated, only covered up. Since humans are naturally sensitive to social norms, instruction in learned sociopathy need not be explicit, although this instruction may still be systematically implemented and usually occurs within long-standing cultural institutions, under the auspices of some authority.

Governance

As the assertion has been made that most leaders are psychopaths, we should expect any government to be a key institution in which learned sociopathy takes place. In totalitarian governments this must be the case, since the number of people committing atrocious acts is generally far too large to be accounted for by genetic psychopaths. However, seemingly democratic governments are not immune since psychopaths are charming, and they are expert liars – traits which are likely to allow them to secure votes and rise to the top. In popular culture, there is a familiar archetype of the earnest, idealistic first-term member of Congress, who goes to Washington, D.C. and learns, “that isn’t how things work in Washington.”

Another theater where learned sociopathy seems to play a role is the corporate environment. Occasionally, corporate sociopathy or psychopathy is discovered to include criminal behavior, which tends to be prosecuted less vigorously than the far less impactful, so-

called “blue collar” crime. Even outside of these extremes, though, there are strong, culturally accepted pressures for corporate managers to disregard any negative impacts on others caused by the corporation’s policies or strategies. Indeed, this is sometimes sold under the banner of “fiduciary responsibility.” An example of this is when a corporation performs expected value analysis to determine whether it is likely to be less costly to merely settle lawsuits on an injury-causing defect in a product than it would be to recall the product and repair the defect.

Summary

This paper has presented a model, comprised of the following claims: 1) Evolution in species where coordinated group activity, and especially culture, is a dominant factor in survival is a special case. In this case, genes are passed on to progeny, in part, on a group basis, and physiology evolves interactively with culture. 2) Psychopathy and psychotypicity have evolved side by side in human groups, because the combination provides a survival advantage to groups with these genotypes in their gene pool. The advantage comes from easing the instinctual aversion to intraspecific killing when applied to humans in other groups, allowing their resources to be seized, while mostly preserving this aversion for humans within one’s own group. 3) Psychotypicity includes genetically-driven traits, referred to as “handles” in this model, which allow psychotypical people to be easily manipulated by psychopaths. Manifestations of the major handles appear as religiosity, patriotism, inappropriate social conformity, inappropriate obedience to authority, “willing suspension of disbelief” (acceptance of lies told by leaders), and “learned sociopathy” (impairment in empathy acquired through the willing adoption of certain societal roles). 4) The existence of these psychotypical handles creates a tendency for psychopaths, and also to some degree sociopaths and narcissists, to rise to high leadership positions. There is no conscious decision to follow psychopaths, or awareness of it, only a positive emotional response to their charming, manipulative, and confident qualities.

Ramifications

So if this model is true, what are the ramifications? For the vast majority of the roughly one million years plus of the existence of the genus homo (homo erectus is included since the species used stone tools and appears to have formed strong social groups), “warfare” was conducted using weapons on the level of stone axes and spears. People were killed, but there was never any risk of widespread annihilation. Later, bronze and iron produced weapons with the capability to kill in much greater numbers for a few thousand years, but their killing power was still limited. Over the last few hundred years, an increasingly accurate knowledge of chemistry, classical mechanics (physics), and finally quantum mechanics has produced weapons

giving humans incredible power to kill – up to and including the power of self-extinction. Additionally, the power of genetic engineering, along with increasing ease and precision with which it can be performed (via CRISPR technology), opens up the very real eventual possibility of selective genocide by viruses which can be spread worldwide easily, but which will kill only those with the targeted genetics or a lack of pre-arranged genetically engineered immunity. These incredible tools of human intraspecific killing have only existed for the proverbial blink of an eye when compared against the million year existence of humanity. Rationalizations such as “oh, it has always been this way” will not work any longer; it has *not* always been *exactly* this way.

Just as psychopaths have no concern for the lives of others in the current time, they also have no concern for future generations, nor for the environment in which those generations will live. If we look at actual governmental and corporate policies, not the hopeful words or token gestures of politicians and public relations departments, we tend to see such a lack of concern. We see policies which cause perils to the environment and future human living conditions: inevitable petroleum spills, use of questionable pesticides, greenhouse gasses to be denied, carbonic acid in oceans to be ignored, the indiscriminant use of antibiotics (especially in livestock) leading to antibiotic resistant diseases... to name a very few. This lack of empathy is not constrained to physical perils either. We see policies in place which are inching the world towards a new slave class: economic manipulations intensifying and creating new poverty, the scientific application of psychology to manipulate the masses with ever greater precision, the erosion of civil rights in the name of security. If our leaders truly are psychopaths, and we continue to follow them, we can be guaranteed of more of the same – exponentially more.

Consider an infant in a crib. This is not a problem. Now consider an infant in a crib with a loaded gun. We have been infants for all of human existence, with little power to harm anyone but ourselves, but in the last few centuries we have become infants with the power to destroy everything. We must mature as a species if we are to survive alongside our technological power. Killing others and taking their stuff is no longer an evolutionary benefit. Cooperation, instead of competition, will be what natural selection demands of us going forward. We need empathy and honesty, since one way or another the meek shall indeed inherit the earth, and “inherit” means that a predecessor died.

Psychopaths have a specific neurology which can be diagnosed using brain scanning techniques such as PET or FMRI. Ultimately, we should demand that anyone seeking government or corporate office submit to such a scan. First, however, we must look inward earnestly and persistently and understand that we, the psychotypical masses, are the ones who keep giving psychopaths power. We must overcome our instincts and judge our leaders by what they do instead of how they make us feel, and aggressively discover their lies. We must understand that the future of humanity is in existential peril, and humbly recognize our own subtle greed and complicity.